

5 ideas from City Council to fix Philly's middle neighborhoods

Congressman Dwight Evans wants Philly to be “the laboratory” for showing how these areas can improve.

A stretch of Germantown Avenue in East Mt. Airy, which is considered a middle neighborhood along with Olney, West Oak Lane, East Oak Lane, Mayfair, Wynnefield and many others.

Mark Dent/Billy Penn

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When urban policy experts Paul Brophy and Ira Goldstein and a few colleagues recently came up with the term [middle neighborhood](#) to describe areas of cities that are relatively stable but at risk of decline, they envisioned the meeting held Tuesday afternoon by City Council.

Congressman Dwight Evans was talking about federal support and teaming up with city leaders. A stream of community leaders were testifying about problems and opportunities in their neighborhoods. And for over two hours, citizens and government officials were serving ideas back and forth.

“It was deliberately intended to stimulate this kind of discussion,” Brophy said.

When East or West Mt. Airy neighbors came down to Council, everything stopped. I'd love to get some of that back.

[Jane Cosby, East Mt. Airy.](#)

So consider Philadelphia ahead of the game. Though Evans has made middle neighborhoods a priority at the federal level, Tuesday marked likely the first time any local government has specifically tackled the subject. Some 40 percent of Philly's population lives in a middle neighborhood. They include areas like Tacony, East Oak Lane, West Oak Lane, Wynnefield, Mayfair, East Mt. Airy and others.

The meeting was held by the Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development and the Homeless and based on a resolution from Cherelle Parker, whose Ninth Council District has more middle neighborhoods than any other district in the city. Parker said afterward her goal was to create a formal entity consisting of the private sector and local, state and federal government that would offer solutions for middle neighborhoods.

“Imagine this group of experts coming together to write the prescription to preserve the quality of life of middle neighborhoods,” Parker said.

What could that prescription include? It will likely take a while for any strategy to come to fruition. But here are a few of the key ideas and insights that came out of the meeting:

1. Changes that begin with residents

Brophy noted how the book he edited, [*On the Edge: America's Middle Neighborhoods*](#), largely didn't call for new government programs. Instead its focus was more grassroots, on people living in the neighborhoods and the community orgs directly involved.

“It starts with the people in these neighborhoods who have to care about, love these neighborhoods,” he said, “to help people see the assets of the neighborhood rather than see liabilities.”

Mark Sissman launched Healthy Neighborhoods in Baltimore, which has been seen as a model for improving middle neighborhoods. He said

neighborhoods have essentially competed to show they're worth the attention of the nonprofit.

“We don't want to be in places where the neighborhoods don't buy in,” he said.

Brophy pointed out an example of grassroots participation in Baltimore. Real estate agents there were talking down one area considered a middle neighborhood because they perceived its local school to be of poor quality. So students, teachers and the principal invited real estate agents for a breakfast so they could show that the school was actually of good quality and welcoming. A handful of Philadelphia schools have done this, and many of Friends of groups, but there's not been a concerted effort in specific neighborhoods like these.

“What if that was standard operating procedure in the city of Philadelphia?” Parker said.



Cottman Avenue and Frankford Avenue is the center of Mayfair's main business corridor.

Mark Dent/Billy Penn

2. Improving and marketing schools

Speaking of schools, several people at the meeting agreed a focus on education could help keep middle neighborhoods stable — either by modernizing them or marketing them in a way highlighted above by the Baltimore school.

Congressman Dwight Evans brought up legislation he's introduced that would let schools use tax credits to rehabilitate their old buildings. He pointed out how in Northwest Philly, Roosevelt Elementary is located in a building from 1922 and a nearby charter school was built in 2016, and many favored the newer property.

“I think Congressman Evans’ schools idea is the hook,” Councilman Allan Domb said.

Domb had a schools idea of his own. He suggested middle neighborhoods offer schools specializing in technology.

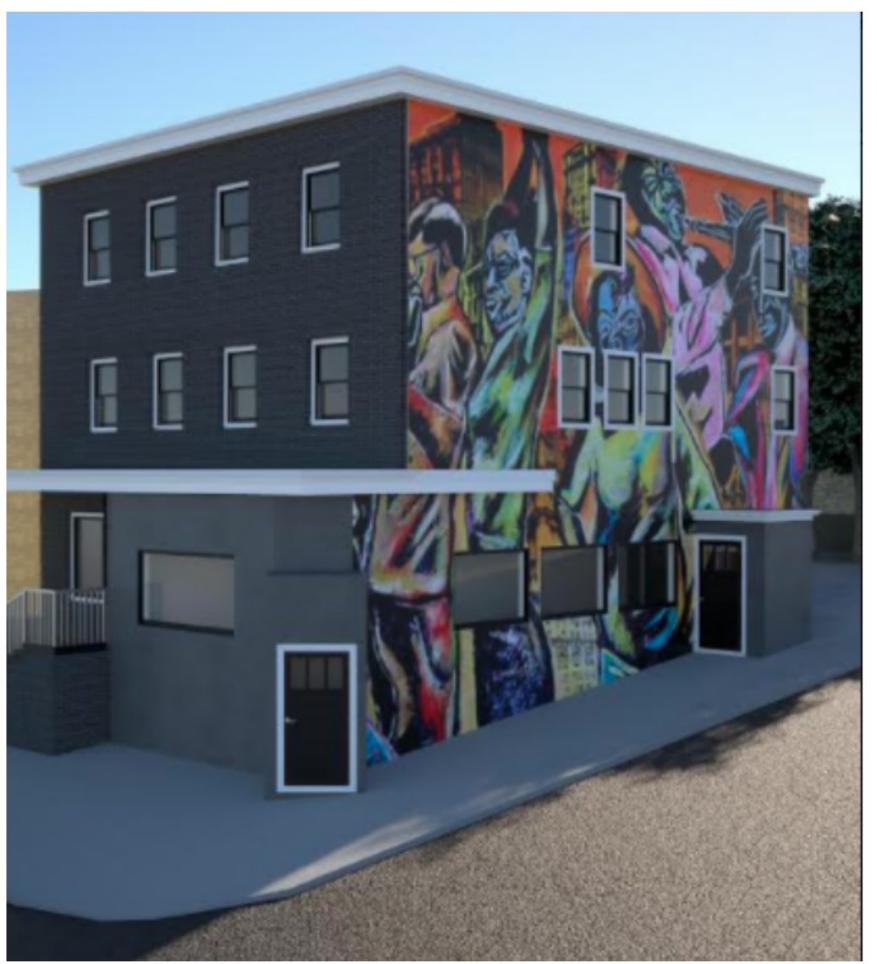
“You’ll become a magnet,” he said, “and get employment in that field and bolster that neighborhood.”

3. A loan pool for renovating homes

One solution for bettering middle neighborhoods is improving the housing stock, but the problem is homeowners won’t want to invest in their houses if they’re not seeing a return on investment. Home values in Philadelphia’s middle neighborhoods have stayed flat for most of the last several years as average values across all of Philadelphia have risen. But if individuals improve their houses the neighborhood might see increased interest and steadily rising home values. So it’s a cycle.

Sissman brought up a loan process used by his company Healthy Neighborhoods in Baltimore. It lets residents of targeted neighborhoods get loans 1 percent below the prime rate and offers a \$10,000 matching rehab grant.

“We’d be happy if you steal our documents, our strategies,” Sissman said.



A before and after in East Mt. Airy

Mark Dent/Billy Penn and Trades For A Difference

4. Getting help from the Feds

I think people need to stop bashing it as much as they do. And just kind of make it better.

Jim Ortlieb, Mayfair

Evans has made middle neighborhoods a top priority during his first few months representing the 2nd District. He helped get a mention of middle neighborhoods in a Congressional Black Caucus briefing that reached the desk of President Donald Trump and held a hearing on them attended by many Congressional staffers. He told Council that despite of all the turmoil in Washington Congress had a few members — Democrat and Republican — “trying to figure out ways to work with cities.”

He encouraged Philadelphia to make middle neighborhoods a focus.

“You can send a message,” he said. “I would like this to be the laboratory where this can occur.”

5. The necessity of private investment

Members from the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and several community development organizations attended and spoke at the hearing. For whatever solution or plan the city comes up with, Parker wants them involved, as well as local businesses and realtors.

“We’ve got to have the private sector first and foremost,” she said. “The first leg of the stool is the private sector.”